

Beliefs Underlying Above Average Participation in Volunteerism

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Abstract

This research examined the beliefs differentiating those volunteers who do and do not volunteer at a rate greater than the average number of hours per work using Ajzen and Madden's (1986) theory of planned behaviour as a theoretical framework. A prospective design with two waves of data collection was employed to examine the beliefs that distinguish those volunteers who volunteer more than the national average from those who do not. The first wave of data collection measured beliefs in relation to volunteering at above average rates. One month later, in the second wave of data collection, respondents reported their volunteering behaviour over the past month. Eighty-one volunteers responded in both waves of data collection. Findings from the study revealed that, in general, it was the costs of volunteering rather than the benefits that differentiated those who did and did not volunteer at a rate higher than the national average. In addition, those who volunteered at a rate above the national average were less likely to believe that there were barriers to above average participation in volunteerism than those who did not engage in volunteerism at rates above the national average. Results suggest that volunteer decision-making involves the consideration of a broader range of factors than has been examined by traditional volunteerism research.

In contemporary Australia, there is increased demand on the voluntary sector to contribute welfare formerly provided by the government (Healy 1998; McDonald & Warburton 2000). Nineteen per cent of the population volunteer annually (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1995) with the non-profit sector relying on this free labour source for its survival (Unger 1991). Accordingly, an understanding of the specific factors motivating individuals to both commence (Clary, Snyder, & Ridge 1992), and maintain their volunteer participation is important (Grube & Piliavin 2000).

Despite the importance of volunteers, the determinants of above average participation in volunteerism are still largely unknown. With few notable exceptions (Grube & Piliavin, 2000), volunteerism research has consisted of two major approaches. The first approach involves a demographic analysis of volunteers. This body of research has revealed that volunteers are more likely to be married, have a higher socioeconomic status (Chambre 1987), cite religious affiliation (Reed & Selbee 2000), and rate their health better (Warburton, LeBrocq & Rosenhan 1998) than non volunteers. Whilst demographic information is advantageous for ascertaining which groups of people volunteer, demographic variables do not provide a causal understanding of the factors underlying volunteerism (Reed & Selbee, 2000).

The second approach to volunteerism research has involved an analysis of the outcomes associated with volunteerism. This body of research assumes that the decision to volunteer is a rational process. Specifically, it is argued that volunteer behaviour is preceded by a cognitive evaluation of the benefits derived from volunteering (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen 1991). Whilst helping others is the most commonly cited reason for volunteering (Kovaks & Black 1999), other outcomes, such as learning new skills (Esmond 2000), feeling useful (Gillespie & King 1985) and providing career benefits (Morrow-Howell & Mui 1989) are also important.

Although the outcome evaluation literature has provided an understanding of why individuals volunteer, there are several limitations with this research. First, the approach taken by this research is arguably too narrow. This research adopts a rational decision-making model (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen 1991). However, rational decision-making usually involves more than consideration of behavioural benefits. Empirical research has supported the inclusion of volunteerism costs, efficacy-related factors, and external factors (such as social influence) within decision-making models. For example, Warburton et al. (2001) examined the beliefs differentiating volunteers from non-volunteers. They found that, whilst behavioural benefits (such as the belief that volunteering would be pleasurable and satisfying) did differentiate volunteers from non-volunteers, beliefs relating to volunteerism costs, normative pressure, and the controllability of volunteerism also differentiated volunteers from non-volunteers. The findings of Warburton et. (2001) suggest that the assumption that individuals only consider volunteering benefits whilst ignoring other decision-making influences is reductionist. As such, rational models should incorporate not only the benefits of volunteering, but volunteerism costs, aspects of control and social influence.

A second limitation of the outcome evaluation literature is that this research focuses on whether or not individuals volunteer, rather than on whether they volunteer at a rate that is at or above the national average of 3 hours per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1995). Whilst identifying the determinants of volunteerism is important, the substantial need for volunteers and, therefore, competition for the services of

unpaid workers means that a focus on what motivates individuals to volunteer at rates above the national average is of interest (Grube & Piliavin 2000). It is possible that the factors motivating people to initially commit to volunteer work are different to those motivating them to volunteer at higher rates.

Thus, the present study aimed to examine a range of different beliefs that differentiate those who do and do not participate in volunteerism at a rate that is above the national average, incorporating a broader range of factors than have been examined by prior research. It included an assessment of beliefs relating to both the costs and benefits associated with above average participation in volunteerism, beliefs about the controllability of above average participation in volunteerism, and beliefs about how others influence the decision to volunteer at a rate above the national average.

The conceptual framework for the study was based on Ajzen and Madden's (1986) theory of planned behaviour. The central premise of this theory is that decisions are made rationally by systematically using accessible information. The theory of planned behaviour is an extension of the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975; Ajzen & Fishbein 1980) which hypothesises that the causal antecedents of behaviour are a logical sequence of cognitions (Ajzen 1991). According to the theory of planned behaviour the immediate antecedent of behaviour is postulated to be the person's intention to perform it (Ajzen 1988). Intentions, in turn, are proposed to be a function of three independent determinants. The first is the person's attitude, conceptualised as the overall evaluation, either positive or negative, of performing the behaviour of interest (Ajzen 1988). The second is subjective norm, which reflects perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behaviour (Ajzen 1988; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). The third is perceived behavioural control, or the extent to which the behaviour is under volitional control (Ajzen & Madden 1986).

The theory of planned behaviour cites beliefs as underpinning the constructs of attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control. An individual's attitude is a function of salient behavioural beliefs, or the belief that outcomes associated with the behaviour will occur (Ajzen 1988; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). Subjective norms are proposed to be a function of normative beliefs, or social pressures from important others (Ajzen 1988; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). Perceived behavioural control is proposed to be a function of control beliefs, or beliefs concerning whether resources and opportunities are available to perform the behaviour. An analysis of these beliefs allows an understanding of the differences between those who perform and do not perform the behaviour (Warburton et al. 2001). As such, the present study will analyse these beliefs to provide an understanding of the differences between those individuals who volunteer at a rate above the national average and those who do not.

Method

Design

The study used a prospective design with two waves of data collection. Prior to data collection, an elicitation questionnaire, used to develop the behavioural, normative and control belief items for the target behaviour, was administered. A content analysis was performed on the elicitation study data and the most common responses were used as the belief-based items in the main questionnaire administered during wave 1 of data collection. The first wave of data collection included an assessment of belief items in relation to above average participation in volunteerism. The second wave of

data collection measured whether participants had engaged in volunteerism at an above average rate over the month between data collection waves. The national average for volunteering is 3.2 hours per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1995). Thus, above average participants in volunteerism were those who volunteered greater than three hours per week.

Respondents

Questionnaires were posted to 385 volunteers on the database of a major Australian volunteer organisation whose major focus is crisis counselling. A total of 141 respondents completed the questionnaire in the first data collection wave of the study. Therefore, a response rate of 37% was obtained at time 1. This rate was comparable with previous volunteerism research that has found response rates between 30-50% (e.g., Anderson & Moore 1978; Frisch & Gerrard 1981; Miller 1985). Of the respondents who completed the main questionnaire, 81 (57%) completed the follow-up questionnaire at wave 2 of data collection. Those respondents who did and did not complete the questionnaire in the second wave of data collection did not differ on any of the variables assessed at time 1. Of the 81 respondents who completed the questionnaire in the second wave of data collection, 66 or 81.5% were female and 15 or 18.5% were male. Concerning their marital status, 23.5% were in a de facto relationship, 17.3% were widowed and 8.6% were divorced. Their ages varied from 17 to 88 years, with the mean age being 53.61 years. Those in paid work or studying made up 34.6% of respondents, while 50.6% were retired or engaged in home duties and 2.5% were unemployed. Missing data accounts for the fact that not all percentages add up to 100.

Measures

Elicitation Study. The elicitation study, used to develop the belief-based measures of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control for wave 1 of data collection, was completed by ten volunteers (eight females and two males). Their ages ranged from 19 to 92 with a mean age of 47.1 years. The characteristics of this sample closely resembled the respondents used in wave 1 of the study.

In accordance with the procedures outlined by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), open-ended questions asked respondents to list the main advantages and disadvantages of volunteering 3 or more hours per week to elicit behavioural beliefs for the main questionnaire. The four most frequently reported benefits (e.g., gaining work experience) and four most frequently reported costs (e.g., being tied down) of volunteering at rates above the national average of 3 hours per week were used as the behavioural beliefs in the main questionnaire. Respondents were also asked which people or groups of people would approve or disapprove of them engaging in 3 or more hours of volunteer work per week. The four most frequently reported referents (e.g., partner and friends) were used to assess the normative beliefs in the main questionnaire. Control beliefs were established by asking respondents to list any factors or circumstances that would prevent or encourage them from engaging in 3 or more hours of volunteer work per week. The four most frequently reported outcomes (e.g., doing paid work) were used in the main questionnaire to assess control beliefs.

Wave One-Main Questionnaire. The main questionnaire assessed volunteers beliefs in relation to above average participation in volunteerism. Behavioural beliefs were assessed by asking respondents to rate how likely it would be that four benefits and

four costs (obtained from the elicitation questionnaire) would occur if they volunteered 3 or more hours per week during the next month. Possible responses ranged from extremely unlikely [1] to extremely likely [7]). Normative beliefs were obtained by asking respondents to rate how likely four referents (obtained from the elicitation study) were to think that they should engage in 3 or more hours of volunteer work per week during the next month; extremely unlikely (1) to extremely likely (7). Control beliefs were assessed by asking respondents to rate how likely four outcomes (from the elicitation study) were to prevent them from engaging in 3 or more hours of volunteer work per week during the next month; never (1) to all the time (7).

Wave Two – Follow-Up Questionnaire. Four weeks after the completion of the main questionnaire, respondents were posted a follow-up questionnaire examining their performance of the target behaviour. Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they engaged in 3 or more hours of volunteer work per week during the past month; not at all (1) to a large extent (7). Respondents were also asked to provide further details such as the frequency and extent of their volunteer work to improve the reliability of the self-reported data. The time stipulation of 3 or more hours, chosen to represent above average participation in volunteerism, was selected as the ABS (1995) national survey of volunteers revealed that the average rate of volunteer participation in Australia is just over 3 hours per week (3.2 hours).

Results

To compare the beliefs of those who did and did not volunteer at rates above the national average three, one-way multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were performed using volunteer behaviour as the independent variable and the belief measures as the dependent variables. Dividing the behaviour scale at its mid-point created a dichotomous independent variable. Specifically, participants who rated five or above on the behaviour item were considered to participate in volunteerism at a rate higher than average while participants who rated four or below on the behaviour item were considered to participate in volunteerism at rates below the national average¹.

Costs and Benefits

There was a significant multivariate effect of behavioural beliefs on above average participation in volunteerism². Univariate analysis indicated that, in general, those who did and did not volunteer at rates above the national average did not differ in their assessments of the benefits of above average participation in volunteerism. However, those who did and did not volunteer at rates above average did differ on their assessments of the costs of above average participation in volunteerism. Specifically, those who volunteered at above average rates were less likely to feel that above average participation in volunteerism would result in their being tied down, doing boring tasks, or having too little time. Concerning the four benefits of volunteering, those who volunteered at rates above and below average only differed significantly on their belief that above average participation in volunteerism would result in their gaining pleasure and satisfaction.

Normative Factors

No significant multivariate effect was found between those who volunteer at rates above and below the national average on the normative belief measures³. Univariate

analysis revealed that there were no differences between the beliefs of above and below average participants in volunteerism with regard to whether important referents would want them to volunteer at rates above the national average.

Control Factors

Finally, for above average participation in volunteerism, there was a significant multivariate main effect for control beliefs⁴. Univariate analysis revealed that volunteers who engaged in rates of volunteerism above the national average were less likely than those who did not to believe that paid work and family or friend commitments would prevent them from volunteering at levels above the national average.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the differences between those who do and do not engage in above average participation in volunteerism using a broader range of factors than has been investigated in previous empirical research. It examined both behavioural costs and benefits associated with volunteering along with efficacy-related factors and normative influences that impact on the decision to volunteer at rates above average. Results revealed support for the inclusion of a wider range of factors in decision-making models with each of behavioural benefits, costs and efficacy related factors influencing the decision to volunteer at rates above average. However, in this instance, normative beliefs did not influence decisions to volunteer at above average rates.

Consideration of the outcome evaluations (the costs and benefits) of volunteering revealed that those who participated in volunteerism at rates above the national average did not generally differ from those who did not in their perception of the benefits of volunteering. However, above average participants in volunteerism were generally less likely to rate the costs of above average participation in volunteerism as influencing their decision to volunteer at rates above average. Being tied down, having too little time and doing boring work were the beliefs differentiating those who did and did not engage in above average rates of volunteerism. Accordingly, strategies designed to increase volunteer participation should focus on changing the negative beliefs (for example, doing boring work) that individuals may hold about above average participation in volunteerism.

The finding that the costs of above average participation in volunteerism differentiate above and below average participants in volunteerism is contrary to past volunteerism research that has examined the differences between volunteers and non-volunteers. For example, Warburton et al. (2001) found that in general, it was the benefits of volunteerism that differentiated volunteers from non-volunteers. In the present study, the benefits of volunteering were strongly endorsed by all participants (as demonstrated by relatively high mean scores; see Table 2). However, with the exception of gaining pleasure and satisfaction, the strength of endorsement for behavioural benefits did not differ between those who do and do not volunteer at rates above the national average. Thus, it is possible that individuals who seek out volunteer work do so based on the perceived benefits of volunteerism and who volunteer at rates above average also perceive that there are few costs associated with volunteering.

Examination of the normative beliefs indicated that social influence did not differ significantly across those who did and did not volunteer at rates above the national average. This finding is inconsistent with expectations and with past research that has found social influence factors to differ across volunteers and non-volunteers (Warburton et al. 2001). The finding that social influence factors did not differ across those who do and do not engage in volunteerism at rates above the national average may suggest that although social influence impacts on the initial decision to volunteer, the decision to volunteer at rates above average is not influenced by social factors. However, a more likely explanation is that the conceptualisation of social influence adopted by the theory of planned behaviour is limited and results in the underestimation of the impact of social influence on behaviour (see Terry & Hogg 1996). Within the theory of planned behaviour, social influence is defined as the degree to which individuals perceive pressure from others to engage in behavioural performance (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). However, wider social psychological literature defines social influence more broadly, for example, as accepted or implied rules specifying group member's behaviour (e.g., Turner 1991). As such, social influence need not always be perceived. Recent research examining a conceptualisation of social influence in line with wider social psychological literature has provided support for the notion that the social influence measured by the theory of planned behaviour underestimates the impact of social influence on behaviour (see Terry & Hogg 1996; Terry, Hogg & White 1999). As such, further research is required to examine the impact of social influence on above average participation in volunteerism, as conceptualised by wider social psychological literature.

Finally, examination of control beliefs indicated that above average participants in volunteerism differed from those who engage in volunteerism at rates that are below the national average, in their beliefs that control factors would influence their volunteering. Whilst those who do and do not engage in above average participation in volunteerism did not differ in their belief that being in poor health or transport difficulties would prevent them volunteering, doing paid work, and having family or friend commitments were rated as more likely to prevent above average participation in volunteerism by those who engage in volunteerism at a rate that is less than the average rate. These findings suggest that emphasising the notion that volunteering can be performed during flexible hours may increase volunteer participation. These findings contrast those of Warburton et al. (2001) who did not find any difference between volunteers and non-volunteers ratings that family commitments or doing paid work would influence whether or not they volunteered. These contrasting results may reflect the difference between the present study's focus on above average participation in volunteerism and Warburton et al.'s (2001) focus on whether or not individuals volunteered at all. For example, individuals may volunteer despite having alternate time demands, such as paid work. The substantially greater time costs associated with above average participation in volunteerism, however, may mean that they are unlikely to engage in volunteerism at rates above the national average.

Thus, the findings of the present study reveal that a broader range of factors impact on the decision to volunteer at rates above the national average than have been considered by the outcome evaluation literature. Specifically, the results provide some support for the notion that the outcome evaluation literature is reductionist with the decision to volunteer at rates above the national average being influenced not by positive outcomes, but by cognitions such as beliefs relating to volunteering costs and

control factors. As such, a broader range of determinants, should be included in decision-making models of volunteering.

The findings of the present study may be of use for volunteer organisations as they can be translated into interventions designed to increase rates of volunteerism. Campaigns within this domain could focus on changing the negative beliefs that individuals hold about above average participation in volunteerism (e.g., volunteering is boring). Further, volunteer organisations could implement strategies to increase volunteerism rates. One factor which below average participants in volunteerism consistently cited as a barrier to their volunteering was time related factors. Those volunteers who do not engage in the average number of hours cited doing paid work and having friend and family commitments as barriers to volunteering. They also cited time costs as important decision-making factors. Thus, the implementation of flexible work hours may be one method via which volunteer organisations could increase volunteerism.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

The strength of this study lies in the application of the theory of planned behaviour to above average participation in volunteerism as this framework allows an examination of the beliefs underpinning the decision to volunteer at rates above the national average. By adopting this framework it considered a broader range of factors than has been considered by empirical research. A further strength of this research is the examination of the determinants of above average participation in volunteerism. Few studies have examined the factors differentiating those who volunteer at rates above the national average and those who do not.

Despite the advantages offered by the use of the theory of planned behaviour, there are also a few limitations in the present study. The measure of volunteerism was based on self-report data, which may inflate the proportion of reported volunteering. Although additional items were included to enhance the reliability of self-reported data, objective measures of behaviour, such as records from volunteer organisations, may have provided more accurate data. Whilst the use of a community-based sample was a strength of this research, the respondents in the present study were mainly older females with a mean age of 54 years and were sampled from one volunteer organisation. Thus, the results may have been more generalisable to older female volunteers than to a broad range of volunteers. Finally, it may be possible that a response bias was introduced as a result of the questions being related to volunteering greater than three hours per week. Respondents who volunteered fewer than three hours a week may have answered the questions in a manner whereby they felt motivated to justify why they did not volunteer more.

The findings of this study have important social relevance for charitable organisations and may provide a focus for advertising campaigns designed to maintain or increase levels of volunteering. As the political context in Australia is moving towards increased privatisation of the social services and user pay systems, the role of non-profits organisations (and also volunteers) in the delivery of welfare services is increasing. Accordingly, an understanding of the factors that lead individuals to seek out and maintain their volunteer assistance is vital.

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ENDNOTES

¹ To examine each dependent variable at a univariate level, a Bonferroni adjustment was made to control for familywise Type 1 error (i.e., for the behavioural belief analysis, the alpha level was adjusted to .008, whilst for the control and normative belief analysis, the alpha level was adjusted to .01) (Tabacknick & Fidell 2001).

² using Wilk's criterion $F(8, 59) = 5.80, p < .001, \eta^2 = .44$

³ using Wilk's criterion, $F(4, 56) = 1.98, ns, \eta^2 = .12$

⁴ using Wilk's criterion $F(4, 72) = 6.31, p < .001, \eta^2 = .26$